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# JOURNAL

## OF THE

# ARNOLD ARBORETUM

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VOL. 57

JULY 1976

NUMBER 3

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### ARTURO BURKART;\* A PERSONAL APPRECIATION

OTTO T. SOLBRIG

I FIRST MET Professor Arturo Burkart in 1951 when I visited the Instituto Botanico "Darwinion" on the outskirts of Buenos Aires to check the holdings there in the family Caprifoliaceae. I was then a sophomore in college and was somewhat awed by the atmosphere of the place, with its high cathedral-like halls where ghostly figures worked in dark corners over their microscopes. I was particularly awed by the tall, imposing figure of the Director. Nevertheless, he took a liking to me, and for the next four years I made the three-hour trip from La Plata, where I was studying, to San Isidro once a week to learn botany from Burkart. He put me to work, first writing labels, then identifying plants, and then working up a small group of grasses, all in the old-world tradition of training herbarium taxonomists in which he believed so strongly. Later, I took Burkart's course in Forage Plants at the Agricultural School of the University of La Plata. There I saw another facet of him in his great love for Argentina's rural sector and his unshakeable belief that the future of the country lay in developing its agriculture through advancements in science. Shortly before Burkart's death, the Organization of American States conferred on him its highest scientific award, the "Bernardo Houssay" prize, in recognition of his agronomic work with alfalfa.

What I remember most about Burkart are his tremendous erudition, his careful scholarship, and his unqualified love for plants. He used to say that there were no ugly or uninteresting plants, and for him there were none. His careful scholarship was legendary, and on the rare occasion when an error was found in one of his papers, it was commented upon in the Argentine botanical community as an event worthy of special notice.

Of German parentage, Burkart was born and raised in Argentina, and he combined a strong sense of patriotic love for the country of his birth with pride in the achievements of German culture. He spoke and wrote German fluently and contributed scientific and general articles to German magazines in Europe and Argentina, in addition to writing his vast

\* 1906-1975.

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bibliography in Spanish. He was strongly influenced by the liberal tradition of the early 20th century. He never could accept the venality, corruption, and political oppression of the Perón dictatorship, and he never compromised his stand, even at the risk of losing his posts. On the other hand, he was not able to understand some of the new forces at work in Argentina, and this led him to take stands, particularly in his last years, against groups and individuals who were trying to reform the University in accordance with the precepts of our times.

Burkart was Professor of Botany at the University of Buenos Aires at the time of his death. Prior to that, he had served for 20 years as Professor of Forage Plants at the University of La Plata. However, the institution which had first call on his allegiance was the Instituto Darwinion. This institute had its start when the wealthy Argentine botanist Cristobal M. Hicken, upon his death, donated his books, his herbarium, and a small endowment to the Argentine Academy of Sciences. Burkart was named its first director in 1937 at only 30 years of age, and he served in that capacity until his death. During these years, with a minimal staff of three to five permanent members, he transformed the small herbarium and library with which he started into the best one in Argentina, and possibly the best in South America. The journal *Darwiniana* became the favorite outlet for Argentine botanists, and it set editorial standards for others to emulate.

All who knew Arturo Burkart will miss this honest and forthright man who loved his country, his family, and his Darwinion so much, but who above all else loved the *Scientia amabile*, as he liked to call his vocation.

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